

Flyers and their traumas: the RAF in the Second World War

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Reviewer: Matthew Grant

One would naturally expect the two books under review, one a history published by an academic press and the other a novel, to be very different treatments of their chosen theme. Yet it is the similarities between them that consistently strike the reader. They are both concerned with airmen serving in the Royal Air Force during the Second World War, but focus on the place of those airmen within British culture and society. Rather than telling stories about fighting the war, they explain the consequences of fighting on the men that did it, how those men understood their wartime experiences, and how they interacted with others. Probing individual and collective experiences, both *The Flyer* and *Day* investigate what it was like to live through a war which had codes of approved behaviour that are almost as familiar now as they were then. The codes emphasised bravery, self-sacrifice and commitment to building a better and more equal Britain and are part of a history of the war that is well established in the popular mindset. Both books show how the lives of airmen operated within these codes but also contradicted them, and as such are part of wider trends in the writing of history and historical fiction about the war. Moreover, both are books that stay with the reader, leaving this one at least hugely impressed with two books which, taken together, seem to penetrate to the heart of the issue of the impact of war on those who fought it.

At no point since 1945 could it be said that the Second World War was neglected within British culture. Yet in recent years, there has been an upsurge of interest in the war, at least if we go by the number of books written on it. Tales of the blitz, evacuation and rationing dominate popular understanding of the war, and tales of El Alamein and Operation Market Garden, of bravery and derring-do from the fighting fronts, seem to have declined in importance. Whether it's through television programmes, published diaries, or the ubiquitous designs influenced by the 'Keep Calm and Carry On' poster, stories of the wartime home front exert ever more allure. In particular, it is the experience of ordinary people in those extraordinary, but familiar, times that seems to captivate contemporary British culture. This trend has been marked in recent

literary fiction, and the war is also an increasingly popular backdrop to crime fiction.⁽¹⁾ Numerous high-profile novels have been set against the background war in the last few years. Several have received, or been nominated for, major prizes, sold very well or have been subject to enormous critical response – and sometimes all three. These include Sarah Water's *The Night Watch* (2006), Peter Ho Davies' *The Welsh Girl* (2007), Rosie Alison's *The Very Thought of You* (2009), and Gerald Woodward's *Nourishment* (2010), as well as *Day* by A. L. Kennedy (2007).

This trend has also been seen in academic history. Military history has declined in popularity relative to the rise of the social and cultural histories of the war. The political history of the war has been hotly debated for many years, and has turned recently away from the seemingly endless discussions of why Labour won the 1945 General Election, to focus instead on how political ideas were understood within society and culture. It is the experience of the war by individuals and within popular culture that has really grabbed the attention of historians. Numerous histories have been published recently about the British experience of war. Martin Francis' *The Flyer* has been joined by *Nine Wartime Lives: Mass-Observation and the Making of the Modern Self* by James Hinton (2010) and *Churchill's Children: the Evacuee Experience in Wartime Britain* by John Welshman (2010) as books seeking to provide a deeper analysis of apparently well-worn stories.

These works, whether fiction or history, all compose narratives that alter the reader's perceptions of a wartime story that is deeply entrenched in the British mindset. *Day* and *The Flyer* therefore share a common starting point in an awareness that the popular memory of the war hides as much as it reveals, and that the standard story of the 'people's war' creates opportunities to tell stories (and histories) that derive much of their power and relevance from the gaps between their narratives and the established memory of the war. The novels mentioned above all feature characters that contradict aspects of the spirit of the 'people's war', whether as conscientious objectors, participants on the black market, or as people contravening other moral or sexual codes.⁽²⁾ Likewise, historians have long been interested in probing the popular memory of the war, especially how it became established, why it has endured, and perhaps most of all, the extent to which it corresponded to the reality of lived experience during the war.

What has emerged is a broad historiographical consensus which stresses that much of the traditional version of the war is indeed broadly true – people *did* pull together in the face of the blitz, and they *did* want a 'new Britain' after the war. What historians emphasise now, however, is that these social attitudes were by no means as universally, or indeed as deeply, held as wartime commentators and propagandists liked to say. In his classic book, *The Myth of the Blitz* (1992), Angus Calder argued the obsession with unity, sacrifice and 'taking it' was vitally important in shaping subsequent behaviour, as people began living up to the 'myth'. Sonya Rose's *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain* (2003) has extended this analysis to suggest that these famous narratives of wartime unity amounted to a 'hegemonic discourse' which dominated British culture, becoming the basis by which all wartime behaviour was judged. As Rose describes it, this discourse created elevated ideals of behaviour, and those deemed to have failed to live up to the image of the 'good citizen' were denigrated within popular culture. In this way, 'good' behaviour was reinforced and 'bad' behaviour policed. Of course, there were fine gradations of approval, and an individual's behaviour could be 'problematical' in one sphere but conform to the utmost in other. For example, many women might be criticised for their sexual morality, but still played a full and active role in the war as conscripted industrial workers; middle-class people might be alienated by the talk of social-levelling, but could still define themselves through their war work and their role of dutiful – albeit reluctant – consumers in the system of 'fair-shares' rationing. Other work has reinforced that of Calder and Rose, and there is awareness that within wartime society and culture many modes of behaviour apparently contradicted contradict the 'people's war' narrative, but such behaviour does not mean that the established narratives lost any of their cultural power.

Both *The Flyer* and *Day* continue these trends, focusing on iconic figures of the war and showing the reader that all is not as it seemed. Martin Francis' *The Flyer* can be seen as a companion piece to Rose's book, looking at an area neglected by Rose and indeed the majority of authors. His interest is centred on the airmen of the RAF, how their war was understood within British culture, and how their lives were represented. A. L.

Kennedy's award-winning *Day* is also about airmen, or rather one particular member of a bomber crew – Sgt. Alfie Day, a rear-gunner on a Lancaster bomber. Although the two books are concerned with active servicemen, their treatment of their subject matter places them firmly in the mainstream of academic historiography and recent fiction which focuses on the home front. Francis' book shows how these men were constructed as glamorous flyers and heroes, and the reality of how they often struggled as lovers, husbands and fathers. *Day* is about all manner of similar struggles experienced by a man coming to terms with his war. As much as their relationship with other examples of their genre, the books have a great deal in common with each other. They illustrate the complexities in the lives of these airmen, their fears, and the separation between the way they were expected to behave and their own experience.

Read together, these two books illuminate each other. *The Flyer's* well-judged discussion of airmen's family lives, love lives, relationships with other crew, and problematic post-war experiences is matched by explorations of these issues in *Day*, whilst the latter's narrative of the troubled Alfie gains resonance from the fact that his problems can be related, in kind if not degree, to the wartime experience of thousands of other men. *Day* is a harrowing book. The protagonist is a man living a life which, like the world around him, appears 'dilapidated'. The book opens in 1949, with Alfie aged just 25. He is a working-class autodidact working in a book-shop owned by a conscientious objector called Ivor. Or rather, he did work there, before he walked out to become an extra in a film set in a prisoner-of-war camp, recreating the life behind the wire he experienced after his bomber was shot down in 1943. Much of his time seems to be spent consciously not remembering the war, burying deeply the painful memories. It is while he is back in the camp, however, that the memories he has tried so hard to forget come flooding back. This process of conscious forgetting and slow remembering is central to the book. At the beginning, he tells himself 'if you couldn't keep control and stay wary, you might think anything, which was exactly the one freedom you'd avoid. You could dodge certain thoughts, corkscrew off and get yourself out of their way, but they'd still hunt you'. If the memories are to be avoided like incoming flak at this stage, it is only by allowing himself to remember the worst of them that he is able to overcome the trauma of the war and reconcile himself to his post-war life. Remembering his return from the POW camp after the war, he recalls 'the trick cyclist ... Wanting to steal what was left of you and pretending you shouldn't object'.

In this way, Day's memories make the man, and the way these memories are narrated is central to the book. Much of it is told in flashback as the memories return. They are memories of the war years and of the community of his crew. His family life is told through his memory of returning to Staffordshire in his uniform. Alfie has joined the RAF to speed his escape from his violent father, but bitterly laments his inability to protect his mother. Apparently hit by falling masonry, Day is convinced his father is responsible for her death. He returned to exact vengeance, eventually attacking his drunken father and watching as he fell into a river and drowned. Compared to what follows, remembering this 'murder' is relatively safe territory for Day. Close friends die, his POW camp friend Ringer after a forced march from the approaching Russians, and his fellow crew-member Puckrose of wounds after being hit by flak over Europe. But even these are not the memories he resists the most. Rather, it is the denouement of the two most important relationships of his life which he tries to forget. Firstly, the crash that led to the death of his crew and his own capture; and secondly, the moment when his lover Joyce, already waiting for a husband captured at Singapore, sent a dreaded 'Dear John' letter, breaking his heart.

It is these wartime relationships during the war that have turned Day's existence upside down. Volunteering as bomber crew was a continuation of his desire to escape. The role of tail-gunner's position also came naturally: 'you're the one they're most likely to kill – that's why it's been what you wanted, from the very first time you heard' (p. 11). But in his crew, and then with Joyce, he finds what he has never had – the warm embrace of a quasi-family and romantic love. The memories of Joyce and the crew, especially Captain 'Sandy' Gibbs and Puckrose form the emotional heart of the book. Day finds comradeship, respect, and deep-seated attachment. Their aim as a crew is to stay alive. Routine and superstition become central. Every pub is renamed 'The Duck's Head', they urinate on the Lancaster bomber's rear wheel before take-off, and they run to the plane half-way through their adopted song, as having left something unfinished means they will return. Alfie Day cherishes Joyce no less than his crew, in part because she allows him to feel he belongs,

and is loved and needed. When this belonging is taken away by her rejection letter, received in the camp, Day becomes even more closed off. More than the crash or his imprisonment, even more than being tortured after his capture, it is the brutal severing of the ties with both Joyce and the crew that traumatises him. The final, cathartic, act of remembering comes when he allows himself to return to the crash and Joyce's rejection. Helped even more by returning to England in an old Lancaster (he puts himself in his old turret seat for the journey), Alfie reaches an accommodation with life. Committing to the bookshop and living with Ivor, he finally seeks out Joyce, who although tied to a house-bound and resentful husband, makes it clear she still loves Alfie and wants him in her life.

Day is a remarkable book that details experiences far from those typically portrayed in narratives of the war. Not only Day's experiences but his attitudes to the war set him apart from the standard 'people's war' narrative. In the novel, the crew have a complex relationship with their allotted task of bombing Germany. Bitter comments about 'murdering' women and children are made, and the contrast between Day and the pacifist Ivor – who suffered burns while saving civilian lives during the blitz – is clear. Ivor thinks Alfie fought a dirty war, and it appears that Day agrees with him. No-one in *Day* is particularly proud of what they do, perhaps save the character called 'The Bastard' by crewmates. This epithet tells its own story. The novel displays a deep ambivalence about the role of Bomber Command in the war which is shared by many within contemporary British culture. Moral distaste for the enormous numbers of civilians killed in the attacks, and the doubtful efficacy of the raids in shortening the length of the war has led some to declare that they should be classed as war crimes. Certainly, Alfie Day's attitude to the bombing war sits better with current sensibilities than some of the more frankly celebratory wartime accounts of the raids.

This is not to suggest that *Day* is anachronistic. Ambiguity towards the bomber offensive was marked during the war, especially from some church leaders, and this ambiguity has sharpened into a reluctance to discuss the bombing offensive within popular culture. The destruction of Hamburg does not quite sit with the 'make do and mend' version of the war. Ever since Bomber Command was denied its own campaign medal, the perception that bomber crews were snubbed has continued. A campaign for a dedicated memorial to Bomber Command to be erected in London has attempted to reverse the 'neglect' of the airmen and to highlight their sacrifices. The politics of memorialisation are complex, but as *Day* shows, we can lament the enormous casualties suffered by Bomber Command (of the 125,000 men who flew operational missions, more than 55,000 lost their lives; around 10,000 more were captured by the enemy) without 'celebrating' the campaign itself.

Martin Francis' *The Flyer: British Culture and the Royal Air Force, 1939–45*, is less concerned with the issue of the bombing campaign, save for stressing that the flyers did not like to think about the consequences of their actions. Francis is more concerned with discussing the 'airman' as a type and as such does not particularly distinguish between the lauded pilots of Fighter Command and the far more numerous men who made up the bomber crews. That said, the same issues confronted by Alfie Day in Kennedy's novel are discussed, sometimes supported by memorable evidence. For example, on the superstitions of airmen, Francis tells of a flyer who noted that his crew went down while he was away even though 'Barker went also. But apparently even that didn't save them' (p. 125). Barker was a teddy bear taken by the crew for good luck.

The Flyer begins with a survey of the role of the airman in British culture. Francis examines how the heroism of the airman was combined with a reputation for risk-taking and hard living. Airmen were also, according to the propaganda, more democratic and less 'stuffy' than other services, more concerned with ability and bravery than background. These factors combined to make the young flyers a potent symbol in wartime: simultaneously brave, dashing and egalitarian they fitted in perfectly with the cultural currents of the war. With their well-cut and 'stylish' uniforms, airmen seemed to have enormous sexual appeal. The vast majority, stationed in Britain, were well-placed to take advantage of this, especially those – mainly fighter pilots – who were within easy reach of London night life. Many flyers perished in road accidents as they raced about the country, and apparently they were keen on filling their cars with the high-octane fuel intended for their aeroplanes. The flyer's allure far surpassed his fellows in the Royal Navy or Army, and the

fact that relatively few airmen were stationed outside Britain until the last year of the war meant that these military men, though living on base, were able to play a far greater role in the domestic life of the nation than other combatants.

After this opening survey, the rest of *The Flyer* details the ways in which the reality of the airmen's lives did not match up to the version circulating in popular culture. It is not a book that spends a great deal of time reflecting on its methodological or theoretical approach, but it sits squarely with other recent cultural histories of wartime in its catholic approach to source material. Melding contemporary discussions, airmen's memoirs, and imaginative literature from the war and just after, Francis provides a range of evidence that gives a wonderful richness to the book. Through it, he reconstructs the complex world flyers inhabited, and ensures they are understood not only as servicemen but as lovers and family men (although, curiously, not really as sons). We see a Royal Air Force riddled with class differences, and airmen struggling to overcome their fears. Most importantly, however, we see how their supposedly masculine world was always leavened with the presence of women: either serving on base, as wives living nearby, or as girlfriends. Some men used domesticity as an escape from the pressures of war, whilst for others the pressures of war ruined their home life. In the end, rather than glamour and bravery, the image emerges of a world filled with sex, snobbery and fear, and often fuelled by Bensedrine. These are stories that do not fit the standard narrative of the wartime RAF, and which are only partially paralleled in *Day*, but which illustrate the lived experience of these airmen and those who knew them.

The Flyer brilliantly recreates the world of these airmen, the way the nation viewed them, and how they viewed themselves. The final chapters, on fear, 'damaged' airmen and their return to civilian life are particularly interesting and show how airmen coped emotionally with their experiences and how the majority of airmen adapted to postwar life. Some were damaged emotionally by the war, men like the fictional Alfie Day, while others came to prominence through criminal activities, like the very real double-murderer Neville Heath. Most men, though, managed to readjust to ordinary civilian life despite the difficulties faced in coming to terms with aspects of the war experience: the violence, grief and the separation from home life. Some sought out adventure elsewhere, and there was an increase in belief in spiritualism, but in general they settled down in civilian jobs and were re-integrated into normal British life. Overall, it is a wonderful book that details the ambiguities of these flyers' lives, providing new depths to our understanding of Britain's wartime experiences. As a book which concerns those on active service, it is a fascinating contribution to the study of military masculinity, which still never loses sight of the importance of its relevance to the wider domestic culture.

The two books are highlights of the recent trend in writing about the Second World War. Using the war as a backdrop to explore emotions and notions of belonging and masculinity, both *The Flyer* and *Day* are in the vanguard of new approaches to the war which are changing our understanding of it. The story of Alfie Day gives Kennedy's novel an emotional power that an academic history struggle to achieve, but *The Flyer* is an excellent example of a history which attempts to reconstruct the subjectivities of individuals.⁽³⁾ In his use of both memoirs and fiction, Francis discusses the flyer both as an individual and a culturally-constructed type. It is an approach that reveals much about what it was like to live through the war, and serves to narrow the gap between fiction and history. Both books are texts that reflect prevailing intellectual concerns. Each no more or less than the other is a product of the shifting attitudes towards what it is important to know about war. For both historian and novelist, the war is an emotionally traumatic setting in which individuals' lives are dominated by a complex mixture of death, fear, comradeship and sex. As such, for all the differences between novel and academic history, they both reveal stories that convey a sense of historical truth.

Both books tell us remarkable things about the war, and both illustrate the direction studies of the myth and memory of the Second World War are heading within British culture. The traditional war stories are so well-established that historians and novelists are keen to subvert the narratives we are all familiar with. For Francis, this takes the form of examining the Air Force in greater depth than before, and consciously building on the work of historians who have examined cultural constructions of the home front and their

consequences before him. For Kennedy, this is expressed in a likeable character who fights a war very different from that praised in traditional depictions, with very different consequences. Both books force the reader to think about the war in different ways and both do so in ways that leave the reader feeling deeply impressed.

Novelists have always revelled in uncertainties. Historians, however, have traditionally liked things a little more clear-cut. Francis is unafraid to declare that there must be a lack of firm conclusions in a book such as his, that experiences were always varied, and generalisations are difficult if not impossible. It means that we leave *The Flyer* understanding that some flyers revelled in the excitement, the danger, and the killing, while others were sickened by the same things. We also understand that they could also end the war and disappear into civilian life, some adapting perfectly well, others struggling. History struggles to tell the story of men like Alfie Day, a deeply-damaged but employed and law-abiding man. In the record of returning veterans, Alfie Day's postwar life would be seen as a successful return to civilian life. Francis' sources do not uncover real-life stories that might be similar to the post-war experiences of either Alfie Day or the characters portrayed in immediately post-war novels, and Francis' rejection of psychoanalytical approaches means there is little discussion of the disturbed unless they come to the attention of the authorities.⁽⁴⁾ Of course, A. L. Kennedy does not need to concern herself with the methodology of the history of emotions. She can strike out and investigate the emotions that a man like Alfie Day might have had, creating a world which although not 'historical' in the strict sense does achieve a genuine sense of realism. It is remarkable that after reading both books, *Day* feels like an in-depth study of an individual that seems very familiar from reading *The Flyer*. To read both books gives the reader not only a deeper awareness of the war, but also a renewed excitement about the possibilities of both genres of writing to convey the emotional and subjective experiences of the past.

Notes

1. Sean O'Brien, 'Dambusters – and other novel themes', *Times Literary Supplement*, 16 March 2011. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. In this the echo of the novelists of the period. See Kristen A. Miller, *British Literature of the Blitz: Fighting the People's War* (Basingstoke, 2009). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. For an academic work which conveys both real emotional power and a superlative examination of the methodologies involved with researching emotional subjectivities, see Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War* (Manchester, 2009). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. On the problem of historicising unseen and undiagnosed psychological damage after the war, see the essays in *Life After Death: Approaches to a Cultural and Social History of Europe During the 1940s and 1950s*, ed. Richard Bessel and Dirk Schumann (Cambridge, 2003). [Back to \(4\)](#)

Other reviews:

Guardian

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/mar/25/fiction.alkennedy> [3]

Open Letters Monthly

<http://www.openlettersmonthly.com/january-tail-gunner/> [4]

Bookforum

http://www.bookforum.com/inprint/014_05/2059 [5]

New York Times

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/20/books/review/Prose-t.html> [6]

Independent

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/day-by-a-l-kennedy-795538.html> [7]

Times Higher Education

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp> [8]

H-Net

<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php> [9]

Independent

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-flyer-by-martin-francis-1625851.html>
[10]

London Review of Books

<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n04/susan-pedersen/suitable-heroes> [11]

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[5] http://www.bookforum.com/inprint/014_05/2059

[6] <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/20/books/review/Prose-t.html>

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[10] <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-flyer-by-martin-francis-1625851.html>

[11] <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n04/susan-pedersen/suitable-heroes>